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SUBJECT: CAMEROON LANDS MINISTER ON CORRUPTION, SOLUTION
FOR USG FFP PROJECT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Cameroon's economic growth is hampered by pervasive problems in the system that governs land use and ownership, according to Lands Minister Pascal Anong Adibime. During a June 6 meeting with the Ambassador, Adibime said he was shocked by the level of corruption within his own ministry, a legacy he has been working hard to correct. Adibime assured the Ambassador that he would resolve the political disputes that have delayed the industrial rice production project financed by the USG's FY03 Food for Progress program, and he expressed hope that a proposed biofuel investment by American firm Grunberg Petroleum would be fruitful. End summary.

¶2. (U) Adibime explained to the Ambassador that land in Cameroon can be privately-owned (i.e., it is not lease-hold), but that the state is the "guarantor" of the land through the title deed process. The Minister of State Property and Land Tenure (known by the French acronym MINAF) is responsible for the title deed system and for managing the state's own property, including land, buildings, and other assets (like vehicles).

¶3. (SBU) Adibime professed shock at the level of corruption he had encountered since he was named MINAF in September 2007. "Can you believe I found the guys guarding my door were demanding money from people who came to see me, even if they had scheduled a meeting!?" exclaimed Adibime. He noted that officials within MINAF delayed handling of files in order to solicit bribes from customers; he had found more than 11,000 such files that had been pending for as long as fifteen years. This corruption has stifled investment, opined Adibime. In an oft-repeated scenario, investors who had obtained land legally were extorted by someone who obtained a competing land title through corrupt MINAF officials. Adibime lamented that the lack of credibility of the land title system has made it almost impossible for banks to accept land as equity, citing examples where defunct borrowers paid corrupt MINAF officials to erase the evidence of a previous mortgage, thereby enabling them to avoid repayment and approach another lender for funds.

¶4. (SBU) Adibime explained his opposition to corruption as a matter of his religious observance and his obedience to President Paul Biya, whose call to fight corruption Adibime took seriously. In the nine months he has been minister, Adibime said he has cleared more than 100 government-owned properties in Yaounde, but the task has been complicated by the complicity of many officials within MINAF. He expressed a desire to automate the ministry's files to better track state-owned property, including government vehicles. Adibime said he was reviewing a proposal by a Cameroonian organization to computerize the title deed records and promised to share the project with the Embassy.

¶5. (SBU) Adibime said Prime Minister Inoni had sent him to visit Lagdo in mid-May, to devise a solution to the problems

that have delayed implementation of a project to generate industrial rice production and husking in the Lagdo region. (Note: The project, managed by the Societe Agro-Industrielle de la Benoua (SAIB) had received substantial support, at the urging of the Cameroonian Presidency, from the USG's FY03 Food for Progress Program. Despite the urgent need for the program and the apparent high-level support, the project has been stalled for years, waiting for a decision on the land title for the project. End note.) Adibime said that the legitimate concerns of some ethnic groups in the region (especially the Touperi) had been manipulated by individuals who sought to use it to their political advantage. Adibime said these groups felt vulnerable because they did not have proper title to their own land. To resolve the issue, Adibime proposed to have the state issue title documents to assuage the concerned groups and thereby dissipate their opposition to the rice project.

¶6. (U) In response to the Ambassador's appreciation of MINAF's work to help American investor Grynberg Petroleum identify land for a biofuels project, Adibime expressed optimism that the project would prove fruitful. Grynberg plans to grow sugar cane on land that is relatively cleared but has never been farmed, said Adibime, and MINAF will lead the process to cultivate the buy-in of the local communities.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: We were already thankful for Adibime's help to advance the Lagdo and Grynberg files, which have remained inexplicably stalled for too long, especially in light of unmet need for rice in Cameroon and globally. We were further impressed by his strong grasp of his portfolio

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and unusual candor in describing the challenges he faces within his own ministry. Adibime has been hailed in the press as a crusader against illegal occupation of government property, a reputation that was strengthened in this, our initial meeting with him. We look forward to review MINAF's proposal to computerize the title deed system, which could have far-reaching impact on Cameroon's economic development. We will also look for ways to support and strengthen Adibime's good governance program, a true gem in Cameroon's jaded environment.
GARVEY